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SUBJECT: HUNGARY'S ELECTIONS: ENERGETIC CAMPAIGN, CLEAN
VOTE (C-RE6-00145)

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Summary

[1](#)1. (U) Since 1990, international observers have deemed all of Hungary's elections free and fair. There is no basis for believing that outcome of the first round was affected by the alleged irregularities that have been reported in the course of the campaign. On April 10, one day after the first round, National Election Commission chair Emilia Rytko informed the press that there had been no evidence of foul play. Between the state-owned and opposition-friendly media outlets, all parties had opportunity take their message to the public. In the course of this spirited campaign, there have been reports of minor abuses and excesses. Campaign-financing regulations remain weak (reftel B), a situation that the major parties are unprepared to remedy. This cable attempts to characterize the overall campaign and place reported abuses in context.

The Campaign: Spirited, with Minor Incidents

[1](#)2. (SBU) Hungary's 2006 election campaign was generally a civil affair, with parties and candidates having broad access to the media, and the voters having ample opportunity to see the parties' true colors. The process was unmarred by political violence. The one-day "campaign silence" prior to the vote was respected. Such incidents and allegations as appeared were isolated and did not influence the outcome of any race, let alone the national contest. Post notes here that cries of "foul" were generally more characteristic of the opposition than the ruling coalition party machines. Such allegations as there were can be broadly categorized as follows:

-- Data protection/privacy concerns: The most prominent reported incident in this campaign has been the hacking of the MSZP party website from server.fidesz.hu on February 3. In an official statement, FIDESZ claimed that it had obtained the website password from a publicly-accessible online posting. The police opened an investigation into the case. Secondly, MSZP's local organization in Gyula complained of a local city council employee who allegedly sent a list of names, addresses, e-mail addresses and party preferences of local residents to the campaign manager of the local FIDESZ candidate; FIDESZ spokesperson Peter Szijjarto denied any connection between the employee and the party's candidate. The National Election Commission examined the Gyula case as an instance of the possible abuse of voters' personal data.

FIDESZ spokesperson Szijjarto reported that a briefcase containing MSZP campaign literature and personal data on residents of Pomaz was found on a commuter train; a related news report claimed that the findings consisted merely of "one election leaflet, three or four pieces of paper and business cards." Police in Budapest's first district opened an investigation into the matter. In the course of the campaign, Thirdly, MSZP also charged that FIDESZ possesses personal information on all the country's voters. FIDESZ, after initially denying that it held such information, later admitted that it indeed had lists of supporters but that it had compiled the lists during grass-roots campaigns of the last two years such as the National Consultation and the National Petition drives. Party spokesman Szijjarto has admitted to FIDESZ buying a list of first-time voters, but he stated that the party had subsequently destroyed the list. (Note: In April, FIDESZ communications director Tamas Deutsch-Fur acknowledged that the party is directing activists to deliver "personal" letters from Orban to 400,000 first-time voters. Data Protection Ombudsman Attila Peterfalvi also warned the parties to respect the sanctity of personal data stored by local government offices.

-- Scuffles: There were some reports of scuffles involving campaign workers collecting nomination slips. (Note: Each voter may submit one nomination slip in support of entering a candidate on the local ballot. Any citizen found to submit more than one such slip thereby invalidates all of them. Centrum Party chair Mihaly Kupa has accused both major parties of shutting out smaller ones by their allegedly aggressive tactics.) One incident that drew comment from Parliament Speaker Katalin Szili (MSZP) and SZDSZ party president Gabor Kuncze involved an attack by a 45-year-old man on an elderly woman while either collecting FIDESZ nomination forms or distributing FIDESZ leaflets in Pecs.

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(The man later denied that he had assaulted the woman because of her political views.) According to press reports, a Centrum Party candidate was assaulted in his home by burglars. In Budapest's eleventh district, a 43-year-old security guard used a gas pistol to fire on an SZDSZ activist collecting nomination slips. (The assailant stated that he was bothered by those collecting nomination forms.) to some calls to abandon the practice of sending party activists door to door to collect nomination slips.

-- Death Threats: While there have also some death threats in the campaign, there have been no reported attempts to injure a candidate or prominent campaign figure. In March, a 17-year-old boy was apprehended after e-mailing a death threat to PM Gyurcsany; he was released after interrogation. Between rounds one and two, Interior Minister Monika Lamperth (MSZP) offered to provide a security detail to MDF party president Ibolya David after the latter received "several" death threats. FIDESZ spokesman Peter Szijjarto has claimed that he received an obscene death threat in letter form.

-- Petty Vandalism: On March 15, the MSZP office in Vasvar was broken into, with some 500 nomination slips removed and some posters stolen. In Budapest's twelfth district, the FIDESZ office reported that a vandal had smeared red paint on the outside of the office, as well as on a nearby memorial. Also in March, a man armed with a hunting knife, professing right-wing views and encouragement from his father, broke into a Nyugatszenterzsebet property under construction and belonging to Pecs's Socialist mayor Laszlo Toller; Toller declined to press charges. In April, police caught the nephew of FIDESZ's Budapest faction head and the son of the tax office director defacing MSZP posters.

-- Pressure Tactics, Blackmail: MDF has been particularly sharp in its accusations of FIDESZ's attempts to pressure the smaller party's candidates out of the race. In March, FIDESZ party president Viktor Orban promptly withdrew party support for candidate Zoltan Bago after the Bago's MDF rival

publicized an incriminating tape recording. In that recording, the FIDESZ candidate threatened his MDF opponent with untoward career consequences if the latter did not withdraw from the race. MDF caucus leader Karoly Herenyi charged that Bago was carrying out his party's instructions, which FIDESZ spokesperson Peter Szijjarto denied. (Note: Hungary's two-round election system encourages horse-trading between the parties for one candidate to throw support to another.)

Media Access: Ample and Diverse

¶3. (U) Both before and after the first round, all political parties enjoyed free access to the media to express their views and to address their prospective voters. Even the statistically insignificant, very small far-right alliance of MIEP and Jobbik were covered by both the print and electronic media. Individual media outlets gave more (sometimes exclusive) opportunities to the parties and politicians they sympathized with, but on the whole, between the pro-coalition and opposition-friendly outlets, all parties were provided ample opportunity to take their message to the public. There is no evidence to support the mainly far-right opposition complaints that the media was controlled by "leftist-liberals" or that parties were deprived of the chance to air their views.

¶4. (U) For the moment, it is too early to predict how savage the campaign might become in the critical ten days remaining before the next round of the elections. Based on our first-round observations, however, we have every reason to believe that freedom of the press will continue to be respected, and that all involved in the campaign will continue to have a fair chance to influence prospective voters with their unrestrained and uncensored appearances in the print and electronic media.

A Clean Vote

¶5. (U) Wearing observer badges issued by the National Election Commission, eight teams of Embassy personnel visited more than one hundred polling stations in all regions of Hungary on April 9. No polling station reporting long lines or wait times. All observers reported that election officials were "friendly and forthcoming." Most polling stations were staffed with six to twelve paid election

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officials and volunteer workers. Volunteers were from the four parliamentary parties, and appeared to work well together.

¶6. (U) Despite charges that some polling stations might see attempts to buy votes or manipulate the balloting, there have been no such reports. One alienated MSZP local politician also claimed that the party plans to revive a practice allegedly employed in the 2002 elections, in which colluding voters would bring their blank ballots outside the voting center to a waiting party activist, who would then pay them for their cooperation, complete the ballot and send it inside with the next participant in the scheme. That voter would collect a blank ballot, submit the completed one, and spirit the blank one outside to the party activist, and so on in a chain. In April, the National Election Commission issued a statement condemning the practice. Before the first round, Roma Affairs State Secretary Laszlo Teleki had told Poloffs that he fully expected there to be incidents of buying Roma votes in the April elections.

¶7. (U) In this year's contest, absentee balloting was made possible at Hungarian embassies abroad, bringing in some 8,100 votes. FIDESZ was the only party that sent observers

to foreign missions to observe the vote; no irregularities were reported. Under an Interior Ministry decree, voters who will not be in their home district for round two of the elections may arrange to vote in another district instead. FIDESZ's Hajdu-Bihar county chair has alleged that MSZP plans to bus large numbers of supporters from Budapest to Debrecen's fourth district to support the party's local candidate. (Note: According to press reports from one day before the registration deadline, a total of 417 Budapest voters had arranged to vote in Debrecen.) (Comment: That charge appears overblown, given the chairman's claim that MSZP would be sending 60 busfuls of supporters to Debrecen.)

Comment

18. (U) While the campaign was energetic, and there were some substantiated reports of concern, such as the alleged server hacking and attempted blackmail, none had any serious impact on the final outcome. Where appropriate, police opened investigations, and there is no indication that they pursued them or publicized them to partisan advantage. Campaign-finance limits are unrealistically low, and at least three of the four parliamentary parties exceeded allowable levels. Yet most importantly, all parties had ample opportunity to air their views before the electorate, and the electorate has been unimpeded in expressing its preference. We can commend Hungary's election commission for a professional job.

19. (U) Visit U.S. Embassy Budapest's classified website:
www.state.gov/p/eur/budapest/index.cfm

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